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Veterans and Navy officials Monday unveiled an emergency room and surgical center in North Chicago, marking the first federal health-care facility of its kind.

The \$13 million facility is at the North Chicago Veterans Administration Medical Center and includes four new operating rooms and an expanded emergency room with 14 additional examination rooms.

In 2003, the nearby Great Lakes Naval Station and the VA began integrating their health-care facilities in an effort to save money and keep the VA center from closing.

The latest expansion, funded by the VA, is phase two of a three-phase project that will culminate with a \$122 million new federal ambulatory care center.

The new emergency room and surgical center has actually been completed since June and used by patients. It was unveiled to the public Monday.

Since June 1, the naval hospital at Great Lakes shifted its inpatient medical, surgery and emergency services to the VA medical center.

The naval base and the VA Medical Center are less than a mile apart and officials estimate that combining services will save about \$4 million per year and improve health care.

"Some may view the scope of this venture small, compared to other costly construction projects," said Capt. Michael Anderson, commanding officer of the Naval Health Clinic Great Lakes. "I can assure you this represents a significant milestone in the journey that continues to improve federal health care."

In October 2003, the naval health clinic shifted its mental health inpatient services to the VA center.

The future of the VA complex was in question in early 2000 when the Department of Veterans Affairs threatened to shut down the facility as part of a downsizing campaign and budget cuts.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, said he wasn't going to let that happen and won approval for the first stage of the integration project.

"The integration of these two facilities ensures the survival of veterans' health care here in northern Illinois," Kirk said.

A new VA/Navy hospital on the VA grounds will be built beginning next year.

The \$170 million hospital will include a \$1.3 million Women's Health Clinic and will serve the Navy and the projected 55,000 veterans expected to be living in Lake County by 2010.

Retired Navy reservist Stan Nathanson, 76, of Buffalo Grove, was one of several veterans at the ceremony Monday.

"I'm very pleased to see all our veterans being taken care of," Nathanson said. "We were already getting good care. If we don't, I let them know about it. And if anything, it will only be better now."